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In a ten year study of 1,200 children living in a midwestern city, it was found that those from deprived backgrounds missed about three times as many days of school as their classmates from upper-middle-class families.

Reasons for this situation were poor diet, uncared-for illnesses and accidents. Also the feelings that child had about himself played an important role. The child's progress at home and school was not watched closely, and he was rarely praised for each new step he took toward maturity. As a result, children began to feel that they were unimportant.

In families where the children received little reward for growing more mature, they often turned to daring behavior as a means of gaining attention and relieving the monotony of their lives; fully thirty percent of the underachieving lower-class youngsters were ready to try almost anything. Another reason why deprived children were accident prone was that neither they nor their parents saw the world as governed by cause and effect relationships; instead they felt that the world acts on them and that they could do very little to influence it. In addition to discouraging learning from experience, fatalism led to accidents because in order to prevent accidents, a person should use foresight.

Through parent and child education, many of the hazards in these children's lives could be eliminated.

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# The Kid With Two Strikes Against Him

Gordon P. Liddle
University of Maryland

Robert E. Rockwell
Quincy Youth Development Commission

Sadly enough, it is the very child who needs to be in school every day who is absent most often. It is the deprived child--the potential drop-out--whose seat is most frequently empty. In a 10 year study of 1,200 children living in a midwestern city, we found that those from deprived backgrounds missed about three times as many days of school as their classmates from upper-middle-class families.

Why? Poor diet and uncared-for illnesses were partially responsible. But accidents also took a heavy toll. And contrary to what you would logically expect, one accident did not seem to lead to more careful behavior in the future. Instead, accident "lightning" seemed to strike some children again and again.

Take Donald Thomas, for example. At our second-grade picnic, Donald cut his foot on a broken bottle as he was wading in a muddy stream that flowed through the park. Since the cut was a deep one, we took Donald to a doctor's office to have it stiched.

When we brought him home we found that Donald lived in a poor, run-down section of town. His parents are separated, and Mrs. Thomas and her six children crowd together in a dilapidated, old house that is heated by a wood-burning stove. In front of the house a steep bank drops sharply, unprotected by a fence. The yard is cluttered with cans, discarded toys, auto parts, bricks and broken glass. The back door needs a hinge, and the screen is torn.

When we carried Donald into the house, his mother took the accident very casually. She was not at all upset. In fact, she seemed to regard the accident as commonplace, as indeed it is in this family. Not two months before, Donald's sister stepped on a nail

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in the back yard, injuring her foot. A year ago, when Donald was a first-grader, he fell from a tree and broke his arm. And at the time of this accident, hewwas still recovering from a severe sunburn.

Mrs. Thomas' calmness in the face of a bad accident seems to be the result of an attitude of resignation. Apparently, an unhappy home life as a child, an unsuccessful school experience and two stormy marriages have had a deadening effect on her. Mrs. Thomas sees the world as acting on her; she doesn't recognize that her own actions and inactions affect her life or her children's. In her own way, Mrs. Thomas loves her children; but she doesn't supervise them very closely. After talking to her, you're left with the feeling that she really doesn't care for anyone very deeply.

How Does Donald See Himself?

Like so many other youngsters from deprived homes, Mrs. Thomas' children have accidents--again, and again and again. As part of our study, we asked ourselves "Why are so many children from deprived homes !accident prone?'" And eventually, we came to believe that the feelingsschildren have about themselves play an important role.

In large families of downtrodden people, parents are often tired and discouraged. Mothers such as Mrs. Thomas frequently cannot remember when a particular child of theirs learned to walk or talk. Their younster's progress at home and school is not watched closely and consequently, he is rarely praised for each new step he takes toward maturity. In time, the child begins to feel that he's an unimportant little person.

Now, contrast the life of Donald Thomas with those of Jody and Jim Spilker. Bob and Betty Spilker, Jody and Jim's parents, were married after Bob dropped out of college to take a job as a salesman. When Jody and Jim were born, their mother spent a lot of time with them. She constantly talked about their achievements because she deeply

made "babyproof." Gates were placed at the top of stairs, medicines and cleaning detergents were locked up or kept out of reach. "Be careful, you might get hurt," became a familiar household expression.

Jody and Jim have had few accidents so far, and as they grow older, they probably will stay relatively safe. For every time they find themselves in a potentially dangerous situation, a little voice within them will say: "Be careful, you might get hurt."

By their words and actions, Bob and Betty Spilker have convinced their children that health is worth protecting. Jody and Jim are growing up with the idea that their future happiness depends on being careful, not on "Lady Luck." The tragedy is that Donald Thomas and many little children like him don't have a familiar echoing voice to remind them that they are precious and fragile people.

"I Like To Live Dangerously"

In families where the children get little reward for growing more mature--families like Donald's--children often turn to daring behavior as a means of gaining attention and relieving the monotony of their lives. And their lives are often boring. Children from deprived homes have far fewer toys to play with than other children. They don't have interesting books and pictures to look at, or interested adults who are willing to talk to them. Their parents don't take them to see new places, and the conversations they hear at home don't do much to stretch their interests. So when things get dull, as they often do, they resort to the daring and the dangerous to brighten things up.

The lower-class underachievers in our study very frequently admitted that when they got bored, they liked to stir up some excitement. "I like to live dangerously" many of them stated, "You're only young once, you know."

When we tested a group of ninth-graders, only 8 per cent of the upper-middle-class children said they would do "almost anything on a dare." But fully 30 per cent of the underachieving lower-class youngsters were ready to dare "almost anything." Similarly,

others from passing me," applied to them. Children who are bored and feel unimportant and unloved crave attention in the same way that they crave candy or material possessions. Unfortunately, attention-getting behavior is often dangerous.

Rules By "The Fates"

Another reason that deprived children are "accident prone" is that neither they, not their parents, see the world as governed by cause and effect relationships. Mrs. Thomas' feeling that the world acts on her, and that she can do very little to influence it, is common among culturally deprived families.

This feeling of helplessness prompts people to "live for today," to indulge desires of the moment and forget about the future. Perhaps more important, it makes it hard for them to learn from experience. For example, if a man has an accident or loses his job, he is apt to say: "Today just wasn't my lucky day, I guess." Instead of thinking about why he lost the job, or what caused the accident--and what he might do to avoid such disasters in the future--the man fatalistically ascribes everything to "bad luck."

Such lack of foresight is the product of a fatalistic attitude that resignedly accepts the world and life as it comes. In addition to discouraging learning from experience, fatalism leads to accidents because in order to prevent accidents, a person must use foresight.

It's obvious that deprived children aren't taught to use foresight because their parents don't really look ahead or think about tomorrow. After all, why think about tomorrow when you expect, as many of these people do, that tomorrow won't be any better than today? Many feel that because they live in the "wrong" part of town or have dark skin, they are cut off from the glittering prospect of finding a place in the sun.

These feelings are transmitted by the parents to their children and as they grow older, culturally disadvantaged youngsters come to feel that they aren't very important people. The result is that they become careless with their own physical safety. On the other hand, children like the Spilker youngsters grow up feeling that they are important, not only to their parents, but also to many other people in their world, and so they are far more likely to be careful of their physical well-being.

Another accident-producing element in the deprived child's life is the location and state of repair of his home. Usually, he lives in a congested area of the city, near railroads, factories, highways and busy streets.

Absentee landlords seldom make needed repairs, and children who live in cluttered, unkempt houses rarely see an example of safe surroundings. Overheated wood or coal stoves cause fires that can make the winter months fatal for these youngsters. Moreover, when grease is allowed to accumulate on the stove, when dishes go unwashed, and rags, toys, soiled clothing and waste paper clutter the house, children are constantly exposed to falls and fire hazards.

Too Much Freedom

In addition, the deprived child has considerable freedom form parental control. But the freedom isn't granted on the basis of the child's maturity, but simply because his parents are too busy or don't care enough to keep track of what he's doing. Accidents are frequent because most children aren't particularly cautious to begin with, and accidents are bound to be common in crowded neighborhoods unless parents are unusually careful.

Certainly, some elements of the crowded neighborhood and the dangers inherent in it cannot be changed. But through parent and child education, many of the hazards in the child's daily life can be eliminated.

Basically, the methods to use in teaching safety to culturally deprived youngsters are no different from those used to teach middle-class children. It is important however, that the deprived youngster's safety education be realistic. By "realistic," we mean true-to-life, for you cannot expect to teach safety unless you find a meaningful way of getting the message across to the children.

One good way to do this is by using outside resource people. A classmate, relative or neighbor who has had an accident can be an extremely effective teacher. People are usually willing to tell their stories, and in doing so, they can emphasize how the accident could have been prevented. Stories of how people avoided near-accidents are also valuable.

Another good method for teaching safety is to have children clip articles about accidents from newspapers and magazines. At 10-or 20-minute discussion of accidents several times a week should result in greater awareness fo the importance of foresight and careful behavior in keeping safe. Role-playing can often be used to dramatize a particular accident and show how it could have been prevented. The teacher can help youngsters make generalizations about all accidents from those discussed in class.

Obviously, the children are not alone in needing a safety education. PTA and parent group meetings can be used to acquaint parents with safe practices and with the roles they must play as safety educators for their children. Perhaps you are thinking: "Oh, those parents never come to meetings." Our experience proves differently. Parents will come, but only after they're convinced that the school is truly interested in them and in the education of their children.

Teachers, principals and members of our staff who went to parents' home and talked with them were often able to get them to attend parent-group meetings. These meetings are different from the ordinary PTA in that no does are paid, no officers elected and only one grade level at a time is involved. Informality is always the keynote. Parents

seem to be much more relaxed and to express themselves more freely when we sit around a table over coffee.

Such meetings also offer an excellent opportunity to bring in resource people who can talk about their jobs--fire prevention, traffic safety, etc.--and get a safety message across to the parents. We have found that resource people can play an important role in both parent and child education.

In trying to reach parents, as in trying to teach their children, the key element is adaptability. In other words, it's important to be willing to make changes in a presentation and to try something new.

The deprived youngsters of this country live in a psychological and physical environment that virtually breeds accidents. It takes special understanding, and especially hard work, to help them live safe lives.